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‘Whose context collapse?’: Ethical clashes in the study of language and social media in context

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Abstract: The longstanding tradition of the examination of language and discourse in context has not only spurred the turn to issues of context in language and new media research but it has also led to numerous methodological and analytical deliberations, for instance regarding the roles and nature of digital ethnography and the need for an adaptive, ‘mobile’ sociolinguistics. Such discussions center around social media affordances and constraints of wide distribution, multi-authorship and elusiveness of audiences which are often described with the term ‘context collapse’ (Marwick and boyd 2011; Wesch 2008). In this article, I argue that, however helpful the insights of such studies may have been for linking social media affordances and constraints with users’ communication practices, the ethical questions of where context collapse leaves the language-in-context analysts have far from been addressed. I single out certain key challenges, which I view as ethical clashes, that I experienced in connection with context collapse in my data of the social media circulation of news stories from crisis-stricken Greece. I argue that these ethical clashes are linked with context collapse processes and outcomes on the one hand and sociolinguistic contextual analysis priorities on the other hand. I put forward certain proposals for resolving these clashes arguing for a discipline-based virtue ethics that requires researcher reflexivity and phronesis.

Keywords: context collapse, ethical clashes, small stories, virtue ethics, phronesis

1 Introduction: Context collapse as a social media property

Contextual analysis of language¹ and discourse has mainly developed on the back of well-defined, focused, local interactional contexts, where intersubjective

¹ I use the term ‘language’ in a broad sense to cover any (multi)-semiosis.

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processes amongst a normally limited number of participants manifest themselves, however implicitly, in the details of communicative how. One of the main aims – and successes – of this work has been to establish links between semiotic choices (e. g. language, visuals, emojis) and participants' identities through a focus on the former (e. g. see chapters in Antaki and Widdicombe 1998). In this article, I consider what happens from an ethics perspective when the local communicative context presents considerable indeterminacy, the sort of indeterminacy that in social media research has been described as *context collapse*. Context collapse arises from the infinite audience that is possible online as opposed to the limited groups a person interacts with face-to-face. As I will show, context collapse belies certain ethical clashes and mismatches which are linked with context collapse processes and outcomes on the one hand and sociolinguistic² contextual analysis priorities on the other.

The definition of context collapse encompasses the idea of a clash in terms of how participants may present themselves through semiosis, for whom and with whom: what works for a limited audience known to a communicator may clash with wider, unknown audiences (Marwick and boyd 2011). This difficulty in sizing up the context, in Wesch's terms (2008), can result in a crisis of self-presentation – or at least the need for negotiation of self-presentation to simultaneously suit different audiences is well recognised as an outcome of context collapse (Ellison et al. 2011).

The online disruption of processes of intersubjective understanding as they apply to focused face-to-face contexts is well-recognised in sociolinguistics and so is the need for a repositioning of contextual concepts and analysis (e. g. Deumert 2014): the sociolinguistics of mobility has in fact been developing an apparatus for dealing with cases of context collapse. As a result of this work, we already have findings that suggest that users themselves develop ways of harnessing and counter-acting the indeterminacy of context, for instance by signaling, with certain semiotic choices, inclusion of specific audiences and not others, in other words, by actively doing some kind of audience selection (e. g. see Tagg and Sergeant 2016: 347pp for Facebook). Similarly, I have shown how taking a narrative stance on Facebook and YouTube when posting and sharing an incident projects specific modes of engagement from audience members who know of the events and characters and can use this knowledge as the basis for their contribution (Georgakopoulou 2013a, 2016).

This emerging work notwithstanding, context remains a key concept in qualitative discourse and sociolinguistic work online and there is still much

² I use the term 'sociolinguistic(s)' in a broad sense to cover any socioculturally oriented linguistic work.

scope for exploring the impact of context collapse on communication choices. In fact, far from being readily transferrable online, the strengths and insights of a well-developed tradition for the analysis of interactional contexts can give rise to biases in the study of online discourse. These biases, I will show, are not consequential just for analytical but also for ethical aspects of contextual work.

The first bias arises from the tradition of inductive and descriptive approaches in sociolinguistics. This descriptive bias often means that there is no well-defined place in the analysis for critical intervention work that would involve the researcher being reflexive about their own ideological and political stance and taking a stand as a result.³ In particular, this bias has been argued to have halted sociolinguistic work on language ideologies and politics (Cameron 1995; Joseph 2006). Combining dispassionate, meticulous and unbiased description of communication processes, which privileges participants' perspectives, with the researcher entering the field with a specific critical stance, has not been straightforward or in certain cases desirable. For social media research, a consequence of this descriptive bias is that sociolinguistic work has not routinely connected with an approach that scrutinizes the researcher herself, including her own social media uses and ideologies (Spilioti 2016).

Another consequence of the descriptive bias, in its connection with principles of ethnographic work, is that at times the importance of the researcher being in the field, observing and having contact with key participants, has been transferred onto the online, as, for instance, is readily apparent in discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos 2008). Although the strengths of such ethnographically-grounded sensibilities are undeniable, in online studies they do not always lend themselves well to social media transposition cases where the field itself is shifting. As Georgakopoulou (2015), Hine et al. (2009), Markham (2013) and others have stressed, online ethnography needs to be adaptive, open-ended and alert to the mobility of discourse across media platforms.

The above sociolinguistic inclinations or biases in the treatment of context online, I suggest, are intimately linked with ethical clashes: I view these as involving moments of uneasiness, tension and 'discomfort' for the language and social media researcher, arising from mismatches and glitches between their inquiry and social media properties, primarily involving context collapse.

³ This political and ideological reflexivity is to be found within Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Wodak and Meyer 2009). That said, the a priori ideologically laden positioning of a researcher vis-à-vis their data, often newspaper articles, as being biased in opaque ways and as marginalizing certain groups and individuals, is not readily transferable to research on social media. In their inception, social media were aimed at giving voice and a platform to ordinary people through participation affordances.

Viewed in this way, ethical clashes for the researcher cannot be separated from the glitches and mismatches of expectations that social media often produce for users themselves. It is notable that these clashes, as I show below, are not always evident and therefore resolvable from the outset of a piece of research. For instance, they may arise when communication and expectation glitches are produced because the front-end and back-end of social media platforms may suddenly find themselves in some kind of misalignment. Stadler (2012: 245) puts this potential misalignment starkly by talking about ‘the light side of semiotic democracy’ characterizing the front end vs. ‘the dark side of spectacle 2.0’ characterizing the (highly monetized) surveillance mechanisms of the back-end. More broadly, since their inception, digital environments have often been described as generating contradictions, tensions and mismatches for users’ communication through empowering at the same time as constraining them: Danet (1997) described computer-mediated communication as doubly enhanced and doubly attenuated referring to the double bind of affordances (e.g. near-synchronicity, liberating anonymity, informality) and constraints (e.g. lack of paralinguistic devices and physical co-presence) that users face. As we will see below, the clashes that such contradictions can give rise to are ethical in a broad sense: moral preoccupations of doing the right thing as a researcher combine with and are shaped by political, ideological and even aesthetic dilemmas. I will then put forward certain proposals for resolving these dilemmas, arguing for a discipline-based virtue ethics that requires researcher reflexivity and phronesis.

2 Context collapse and ethical clashes

2.1 ‘What are my data?’: Data as communicative resources – Data as people

The main constituents of context collapse, namely potentially unlimited and unknown audiences tuning into a specific communication act at different times, routinely create a multiplicity of participation frameworks for users (i.e. roles and statuses in the course of their communication, Goffman 1981): for example, on YouTube, as Dynel (2014) has shown, new production possibilities come into play both for video uploaders and for commenters who not only serve as recipients (viewers) of a video, but also as ‘speakers’ and ‘hearers’ who post, read and reply to comments. Similarly, Bou-Franch et al. (2012) have claimed that the communication set-up of YouTube allows for multiple participation forms, ranging from adjacent turns where commenters reply to an immediately

prior comment to non-adjacent turns and video-turns, which involve comments on the triggering video clip. There is also an affordance of diachronicity with the same post being viewed as live for a long time and comments being added over a long period. This means that the same contributor may alter participation roles over time, from viewer of a video to reader of comments to commenter.

A result of this is multiplicity of roles at best and uncertainty at worst about what participants (and even researchers) think gets done in specific sites and how they view themselves in it. Rettberg, J. W. (2014) discusses how the same piece of communication, numerous tweets about Lisa Adams' battle with cancer, can be viewed as exaggerated and tacky by users who do not know the person and position themselves as readers of her tweets as opposed to her friends or those users who respond to the tweets and enter some kind of conversation. This clash is easily extendable to how researchers view what they call their data: are they 'written texts' or 'people'? And what kinds of people? Authors and readers of texts or interlocutors in conversations? Individuals or parts of 'wild publics' (Deumert 2014)? In platforms such as YouTube where users' demographic identities are not easily attestable, participation with self-branded, fictitious personas (Deumert 2014) on the one hand and on the other hand de-individualized (often highly confrontational) contributions from members of religious, national and other groups is possible (Pihlaja, this volume). Each of the above participation possibilities comes with different ethical issues, choices and responsibilities for the researcher of language and social media in context, as we will see in Section 3 below.

An added complication to the aforementioned multiplicity is the fact that different roles are not neatly separated or static. For instance, the distinction between a sociolinguist's data being viewed as (users') texts and communicative resources and as people is not a dichotomy, as Page et al. (2014: 60) remind us. This has implications for a researcher's ethical stance, including their choice or obligation to change their own roles from, say, 'observer' or 'lurker' to active participant and even co-producer in their given social media research sites (Page et al. 2014: 70).

In the light of the above, the link between communicative resources and identities on social media is more elusive and intractable than in face-to-face, small party conversations, yet the disciplinary priority in looking at data as communicative resources for at least some of the analysis cannot be easily abandoned. In fact, one priority of sociolinguistic work on social media has been to document the 'vernacular creativities' (Burgess et al. 2006) of ordinary users and this necessitates a focus on communicative resources. In turn, such a focus is closely linked with the strong sociolinguistic tradition of documenting vernacular language as masterful resources so as to counter deficit approaches

to them. This is traceable to, amongst others, Labov's (1972) defence of AAVE from its critique as a deficient, illogical variety. Important work in digital language and communication has already made this focus explicit. For Leppänen et al. (2013: 112), for instance, documenting 'the language of social media as woven from multiple and intertwined semiotics materials' is a priority. The assumption is that such processes of resemiotization serve as 'crucial resources for the performance of identity' (Leppänen et al. 2013: 112). In similar vein, Androutsopoulos's study (2013) of German dialects in YouTube videos has been instrumental in showing how vernacular speech is gaining visibility through media affordances which allow its public staging in highly performative ways. Such a focus has been important in dismantling dystopic views of the internet and social media as spaces where language impoverishment is encouraged and where interpersonal relationships are destroyed (Baym 2010). Countering deficit perspectives on social media, routinely disengaged from empirical work, is very much part of a sociolinguist's task, and justifiably so, in terms of the field's historically-shaped priorities.

Redeeming the vernacular may inadvertently require focus on communicative resources as opposed to 'people' and it may not always be aligned with how to approach ethically the producers and consumers of semiotic resources. The researcher's ethical responsibilities may be felt to differ in each case and so the following key guiding principle of the AoIR for ethical research (Markham and Buchanan 2012) is instructive: 'Because all digital information at some point involves individual persons, considerations of principles related to research on human subjects may be necessary even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the research data'. On this basis, the notion of researcher reflexivity⁴ regarding different views of one's data-set and the rationale for privileging one view over another become pertinent and arguably an indispensable part of working out the ethics of sociolinguistic research on social media (Rüdiger and Dayter, this volume).

2.2 Scalability vs. 'the aesthetics of slow'

The second ethical clash involves the mismatch between a frequent context collapse outcome, that of amplification and scalability (boyd 2010) of certain acts of communication, and the overall stance and epistemology of contextual

⁴ 'Being reflexive means the producer deliberately, intentionally, reveals to an audience the underlying epistemological assumptions that caused the formulation of a set of questions in a particular way, the seeking of answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally the presentation of the findings in a particular way' (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982: 5).

research. The former involves speed in processes and a rhizomatic distribution where which direction a phenomenon will take, what will prevail and how, is not linear or foreseeable and the participants or audiences in this process are equally unpredictable. In contrast to this, the pace of contextual research which is routinely done in an ethnographic methodological mode, is slow. Silverman (2007), a key-advocate of the 'aesthetics of slow' in qualitative analysis, has stressed that slowness allows us to tell the ordinary from the extraordinary, the unremarkable from the remarkable. As a point of comparability, the work of film directors who follow a slow approach is premised on allowing the viewers' freedom to indulge in a relaxed form of panoramic perception and, in this way, observe details that would remain veiled or merely implied by a swifter form of narration (Lopate 1998). We can argue that the speed of scalability, from this point of view, may leave participants, including researchers, 'in a perpetual, perspectiveless flux, a flux which defers judgment to a later, saner time, which never comes' (Lopate 1998: 274).

The issue is not only aesthetic or a matter of perspective: The mass aspects of scalability do not only serve as a loudhailer giving disproportionate emphasis, limelight and popularity to what the 'collective chooses to amplify' as opposed to what 'individuals want to have scaled or what they think should be scaled', as boyd (2010: 48) put it. The issue is also ethical. With a stated commitment to an emic perspective, and the slowness of analysis pushed to its limits by the speed of amplification, the tendency for the common pitfall of qualitative research gets accentuated: that is, the sociolinguist's eyes remain fixated on the amplified perceptions of participants rather than on the facts behind these viewpoints (Silverman 2007: 142). This not only leaves silenced voices disadvantaged in favour of participants who choose or find themselves on the loudhailer side. It may also blunt the ability of the sociolinguist to get to the facts or origins of the amplified viewpoints. When does the researcher inadvertently become part of the amplified realities? When does the 'wikiality effect',⁵ which Stephen Colbert put to the test in 2006, enter the research process itself?

Closely related to this mismatch between the slow rhythm of contextual, ethnographic research and the speed of random amplification of certain phenomena within a piece of research is that, as new contexts aggregate and new data are produced, the ethical demands may well change. For instance, research that starts off as descriptive and as focused on data as communicative resources may well need to address the 'new' realities and become focused on data as people.

⁵ This term was coined to refer to something that is posted on Wikipedia becoming true, if enough people believe it.

3 Ethical clashes in action: Context collapse in the social media circulation of a political incident

I will now illustrate the above ethical clashes with my own research, which is part of a larger project entitled 'Life writing of the moment: The sharing and updating self on social media'.⁶ My aims with this project have been to chart the *multi-semiotic forms* (linguistic/textual, visual, auditory, etc.) that life-writing of the moment takes on a range of social media (e. g. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter), with *emergent and remediated genres* (e.g. selfies, retweets, spoof videos, remixes) and, where applicable, on the basis of specific (personal, political, social etc.) incidents and issues (e.g. the Eurozone crisis). I also document the kinds of *subjectivities*, including ethical and political selves, that life-writing of the moment engenders and how these are interactionally achieved. For my methods of data selection and analysis, I draw heavily on small stories research which I have put forth as an epistemological paradigm for the analysis of narrative and identities (Georgakopoulou 2007). The original aim of small stories research was to argue for analytical attention to communication practices that had hitherto been under-represented or not viewed as stories, even though they permeate daily life and are of major consequence for tellers' self-presentation. Small stories research is largely compatible with sociolinguistic work that seeks to explore (ordinary users') vernacular creativities in social media platforms.

Small stories research has been employed within sociolinguistics as a toolkit for narrative and identities analysis in a wide range of informal and institutional settings. It has also been well received outside sociolinguistics (e. g. educational inquiry, narrative psychology, sociology) as an epistemological stance that allows marginalized, silenced or counter-narratives to be uncovered along with the often complex, incipient subjectivities that they articulate. These epistemological principles and outreach render the paradigm well-suited to analysis of stories on social media, where non-canonical in form stories proliferate (Georgakopoulou 2013b). They also make small stories a suitable perspective on the Greek crisis, one that has allowed me to shift attention away from the dominant, mainstream media promoted discourses about the Greek crisis to how ordinary people make sense of it.

⁶ This is a project of the ERC funded Advanced Grant 'Ego-media: The impact of new media on forms and practices of self-presentation' (with Max Saunders, PI, Clare Brant & Leone Ridsdale, King's College London) (2014–2019, www.ego-media.org).

In the light of this, I examined crisis-related news stories from Greece, which became viral in social media, with YouTube videos emerging as a prime circulation phase in my data. One such incident remains amongst the most heavily circulated in Greek political life. It happened in the run-up to the 2012 election in Greece, which at the time was viewed as crucial for the future of the Greek bailout and of the EU. It involved the assault of two female leftwing party MPs (Rena Dourou and Liana Kanelli), in particular throwing water at Dourou and ‘slapping’ or ‘punching’ Kanelli, by a male MP candidate (Ilias Kasidiaris) from the far-right party Golden Dawn (henceforth GD), on a live breakfast news show (7 June 2012). GD, a party widely held as having neo-Nazi allegiances, rose significantly in public support during the period of the Greek crisis: from 0.29% in 2009 to 7% in the 2012 elections, winning 18 (out of 300) parliamentary seats.

My analysis of key transpositions of the incident involved examining numerous uploadings of video clips from the TV show on YouTube as well as several spoof videos and remixes created as satirical takes on the incident. I have reported the results of this analysis elsewhere: in particular, I have shown the significance of whether the incident was circulated as a story or not for the ways in which the context of the crisis was made sense of (Georgakopoulou 2013b, 2014). I have also shown how creative and largely satirical engagements with the original incident involved ‘rescripting’ the place of the incident that in turn effected changes in the plot and the evaluative stances on the original incident (Georgakopoulou 2015).

In tracking the circulation of the incident, I found that the time-frame for the research opened up considerably and resisted a neat separation between data collection and analysis (see 3.1 below), as new contexts and data were aggregated.⁷ For instance, political changes and events subsequent to the incident, such as the imprisonment of Ilias Kasidiaris in 2014, as part of a crackdown on GD’s criminal activities as well as his acquittal for the incident under study (March 2015), resulted in a flurry of new comments and a social media re-engagement with the original incident: tracking these diachronic types of contribution, as Bou-Franch and Blitvitch (2014) put it, was important, as they allowed me to chart the creation of a social media biography for the main protagonists, particularly Kasidiaris and Kanelli, and the sedimentation of specific evaluative viewpoints about the incident.

⁷ Similarly, Burrows and Savage (2014) have claimed from experience that while standard methods, even longitudinal ones, allow a demarcation of the fieldwork and acquisition of data from the analysis, with online data, this proves much more problematic.

In addition to the difficulty in separating out the stages of research and having to play catch up with the constantly shifting and widening distribution of the incident in many different forms, I also found that the context collapse-related amplification and scalability processes resulted in wins for Kasidiaris that I could not have anticipated and that, as I explain below, created certain ethical discomforts for me. For instance, from analysis of the comments, it became apparent that several users became involved and socialized in the incident through their fandom activities in satirical online genres (e.g. the ‘Downfall’ meme, remixes with hip-hop songs). The repeated satirical insertion of the incident into popular culture stories and the engagement with it by different, multiple audiences is at the heart of the social mediatized popularity that Kasidiaris achieved since the wide distribution of the incident. Kasidiaris’ active social mediatized persona involves popular portrayals of him as a macho, outspoken guy. His rants in the Greek Parliament and verbal abuse of fellow MPs have lent themselves to uploadings of numerous videos. His social media persona is thus emblematically standing for that of a guy who speaks his mind, whether this is viewed and commented upon positively or negatively. Agha (2010) has suggested a comparable process of recycling of mediatized personae across different contexts, created by traditional media, through some kind of idealization of certain personality aspects. This involves a process of reduction and homogenization. In the case of the data at hand though, the creation of a Kasidiaris persona has been facilitated by video editing and overlaying techniques as well as by social media properties of distribution and replicability of content on the one hand and context collapse on the other. I have shown how such media-enabled embeddings of politicians such as Kasidiaris and Kanelli into narrative activities have essentially rendered them as characters in plots and de-politicized them, partly by assessing them on the basis of lifestyle and personality, thus erasing any ideological differences between them (Georgakopoulou 2015).

This de-politicization through circulation gained Kasidiaris influence and so it is no accident that the circulated story has become a ‘proud’ part of his Wikipedia biography (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilias_Kasidiaris). This assessment is shared by commentators. The following claim from the online magazine Vice that Kasidiaris was put on the map’ (the web in this case) is not far-fetched: ‘Throughout the Greek political spectrum, his opponents rubbed their hands and waited for GD support to crumble. It didn’t. Within a few hours, a Facebook group supporting Kasidiaris had gained some 6,000 followers and the party’s poll ratings shot up by two percent” (http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/ilias-kasidiaris). Part of Kasidiaris’s social media success, according to the article, is his physical appearance (‘he’s young, he’s tanned, he’s buff, he

waxes'). Similarly, my analysis of YouTube comments suggests a favourable emphasis on his healthy lifestyle and physique as opposed to Kanelli being overweight and heavy smoking. It is also notable that Kasidiaris has employed social media (even tweeting his tattoo from prison) in ways akin to celebrities to 'own his story' and 'set the record straight', while he has expressed mistrust in 'old', establishment media, including TV.

Alongside the social media persona of Kasidiaris, offline, since 2012, several high-ranking officials within GD, including its leader, have been imprisoned and trialed with charges of being principal offenders or direct accomplices in serious assaults and other crimes, including the murder of rap artist Pavlos Fyssas in 2013. Kasidiaris himself was imprisoned in June 2014 but elected as GD MP in January 2015 and cleared for the assault on Kanelli (March 2015).

3.1 Entering the 'hall of mirrors': Reflecting on (some) ethical discomforts

Riessman (2015: 218–238) reminds us that reflexivity involves 'entering a hall of mirrors' that illuminates a social phenomenon from many angles and opens the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge. In Riessman's case, reflexivity even involved questioning her research interest and topic when travelling on crowded trains in India: "India has too many people," I wrote in my field notes, 'why am I studying infertility?' (Riessman 2015: 228–229). Despite the fact that my stated interest has been in the communicative resources employed in story-making processes in the circulation of viral political incidents, I had moments of reflexivity such as Riessman's, which I see as more aptly described as ethical discomforts and clashes. For example, I felt discomfort at the fact that the audiences of my talks routinely laughed when I showed video clips of Kasidiaris attacking Kanelli and that they found the spoof videos even more amusing (something that as a viewer I too had experienced). I was also perplexed by the fact that if you google Kasidiaris, it is likely that you will come across the incident (and my articles about it) before you find out about his imprisonment.

The scalability processes which unforeseeably, as I explained above, created somewhat of a 'hero' out of Kasidiaris often resulted in my feeling frustrated, confronting me with my own political and ideological positions as an individual. I began questioning my focus on this incident half-way through the research: Should I be/why am I not analyzing and writing about the social media

circulations of the event of assassination of rapper Pavlos Fyssas, for example? I also found myself developing allegiances and feeling more sympathetic with social media participants in my data who adopted anti-GD positions. The increase in criminal activities of GD supporters offline, e. g. beatings of immigrants, often led me to reflect on the question of whether I should be protecting users (and their anonymity) with anti-GD positions in my sample more than GD supporters. Was it right to be using a blanket ethics protection for potential perpetrators and victims in such a situation? These moments posed concerns of an ethical nature that I certainly had not considered at the start of the research when, for ethics regulatory purposes, I had decided to use light disguise and not seek the consent of all respondents to videos that I would be analysing, on the basis of the public nature of the comments.

When faced with the above discomforts, one of the issues I had to address in the process of the study was if and when I needed to shift away from viewing my data primarily as communicative resources and in favour of placing emphasis on people and their opinions. I have been torn between the sheer communicative artistry involved in the reworkings of this incident and the insights it could provide me for small stories research, and the need to protect participants. How much of these wonderfully masterful and often humorous data could I present and in what ways, without compromising people's anonymity on the one hand and, on the other, without giving more 'air time' to pro-GD users (and, indeed, Kasidiaris himself) than my own political stance could find palatable? At the same time, to what extent was I justified in talking about YouTube commenters as people with ideological positions and real intentions for violence when there is an enregisterment of polarized, extreme opinions, and the 'villain' may just be a mythical trickster persona (Deumert 2014)? In addition, although the ideological terms of discussion of the crisis were largely erased in the social media circulation of the incident, the alternative scenarios being put forth could easily be viewed as some kind of vernacularization and, in turn, a re-claiming and re-owning of the crisis by ordinary social media users. Should this not be viewed as a sufficiently political position for many users and was it not methodologically problematic for me to start viewing some users more favourably than others in ethical protection terms?

The difficulty of deciding when to prioritize ethical concerns of data as communicative resources over data as people was exacerbated by the feeds, the serial nature of how the data evolved rendering the demarcation of research stages problematic. My contention here is that research ethics becomes an integral part of this 'cumulative logic' of sharing online that not only 'lets certain kinds of content seep through while others are held back' (Rettberg, J. W. 2014: 34) but

also introduces an element of shifting sands in terms of the researched. Research ethics can as a result resemble a goose-chase, a perennial catch up.

3.2 Locating my ethical clashes

The reflexivity process helped me ‘understand’ the roots of the above ethical discomforts and clashes. I came to realize that my discipline-shaped commitment to small stories research and vernacular creativities on social media had more or less unquestionably pushed me at the start of the research to view data as (primarily) communicative resources while, in the course of the research, my own moral, political, ideological and aesthetic principles were pushing me toward viewing the data as (primarily) people. This shift in some ways flew in the face of methodological principles of ethnographically-grounded small stories analysis, as I was tempted to attribute real intentions to social media users outside of the communicative context in which they operate, as well as judging them. At the same time, it was not entirely clear when and how I could make this shift. Even if I did, if I wanted to be true to the principles of my framework, the different tiers of protection for different participants would remain a grey area.

The reflexivity process also suggested to me that these ethical uncertainties could not be separated from uneasiness in terms of my own position and participation status itself linked (too) with context collapse. At the start of this research, and unlike my study of Facebook, I had never commented on YouTube videos or subscribed to YouTube channels. I chose to keep to this and not participate in YouTube videos in my data-set other than in a position of ‘lurking’ that reading comments and viewing videos allows. This type of participation made me inevitably more of a reader-analyst than an active interlocutor-analyst. On reflection, I wondered about the extent to which this stealth presence pushed me toward voyeuristic positions that do not lend themselves to taking a moral stand as a researcher and even intervening, if needed. When and how to shift, however, from a covert to an overt project is also not easy to establish, without for instance compromising certain principles of one’s framework. In this case, my moral-political discomfort, linked with my own – aesthetic and subjective – preconceptions about the polarized discussions that tend to occur on YouTube is somewhat at odds with the small stories practice-based approach. The latter would incline the analyst away from realist, cause-effect connections between language and identities.

The ethical clashes I have discussed here do not fall neatly into regulations for ethical research, of the sort that we need to abide by when putting in an

application for ethical approval. They are partly connected with discipline-specific commitments, as I showed in the case of analytical priorities demanding attention to the communicative how. But, in my view, these clashes also point to something broader. This has to do with ‘virtue ethics’ to which I turn below.

4 Virtue ethics as an ethical sensibility and approach

What to do when faced with ethical clashes that go beyond the regulatory framework of research ethics and cannot therefore be resolved by putting in another application to a University ethics committee? Despite the dilemmatic nature of such clashes and the accompanying tensions and trade-offs, as I explained above, to paraphrase Bohman (2004: 136), if we have objections about the communication phenomena that we research online, we should find ways in which to become accountable to these objections. I view virtue ethics as one such way, in the spirit in which Ess (2016) proposes it, that is, as a much needed emerging sensibility and approach in media and communication studies that puts reflection and reflexivity at the centre of research online. Ess (2016: 415) claims that ‘virtue ethics is precisely well suited to bringing our habits and practices – including those entangled with our diverse uses of media and communication technologies – to the foreground as matters of conscious and informed reflection and decision’. Based on this, he calls upon academic analysts of social media to reflect on what may be lost or compromised in terms of moral and critical values in communication online.

There are as yet no developed ways in which such a virtue ethics position can be fully integrated into a language and social media research project. That said, in the light of this article’s discussion, we can advance our understanding of virtue ethics by viewing it in connection with social media dynamics such as context collapse and by accepting that it cannot hold at all research stages in the same ways. Instead, it needs to embrace unpredictability. The inductive and irreducibly empirical dimension of virtue ethics as something that may come about or become a necessity out of shifting data realities even in medias res of a research project makes it comparable with the Aristotelian *phronesis* that inspired MacIntyre (1985) to talk about social science *phronesis*. *Phronesis* in Aristotle’s ethics facilitates the wisdom of science but it can only be acquired through some form of practical experience, so it embraces unpredictability, trial and error. The end result of *phronesis* is contentment and living well. In the case of *phronetic*

sociolinguistic research, it would mean the researcher reconciling any discipline-shaped priorities with doing the right thing in awareness of the interplay between social media exigencies and their own role and position in them.

4.1 Toward resolving (my) ethical clashes

Virtue ethics can serve as an added layer to regulatory ethics. To integrate it into a language and social media in context project, the disciplinary concerns and priorities that I discussed in Section 2 need to be taken into account or at the very least to be laid bare. There are practical steps that can be taken to address ethical clashes but an analytical and epistemological repositioning may be needed too. Let me return to how my own ethical clashes can begin to be resolved through a virtue ethics perspective. First, I took practical steps which acknowledged what I perceived as a changing relationship with my data from data as communicative resources to data as people. In particular, I switched from light to heavy disguise for all YouTube comments: to be specific, in addition to using pseudonyms for users, I deleted or replaced any references to place as well as other readily identifying information about them. This still does not safeguard against ‘locating’ comments through a Google search, but, as Markham and Buchanan (2012) stress, the principle is that heavy disguise makes such an identification as difficult as possible. I also deleted all visual elements from my presentations and stopped showing certain videos, particularly of the actual incident, which, I had felt, inadvertently glamorized the violence of the scene.

In addition to the above, I have begun revisiting and rethinking small stories analysis as a critical paradigm, away from the initial, perhaps celebratory, spirit of small stories research as putting on the map suppressed and non-normative activities. Reflecting on the implications of the prevalence of small stories in many online forums – and the social actions often associated with them – has led me to reconsider their role in counter-hegemonic processes. Many of the original insights of small stories research came from environments where small stories worked against normativities, in the fringes of other activities and with something almost illicit about them: e.g. pupils in class whispering stories, while the teacher was taking the register, 15 year-old women hanging out on benches and chatting, away from prying eyes of parents. A renewed critical stance in small stories analysis involves an almost reverse direction to the epistemology of the early days and the attested routine correlation of small stories with silenced and counter-subjectivities as well as their uses as emancipatory tools in various contexts. Uncovering ideological forces in the creation of

social media-amplified, dominant accounts through small stories, is emerging as a new priority for small stories research agenda. This calls for re-thinking small stories as vernacular creativities on social media.

I am still in the process of reflecting on how this re-thinking can be most effectively achieved. My sense is that it may require a move toward a more 'prescriptive' stance on communication practices online, in the same vein as Cameron (1995) earlier made a plea for a re-designation and legitimization of prescriptive research in sociolinguistic studies of standardization. Cameron claimed that linguists should accept the need to engage in public debates in frames of reference that are not of their choosing. Social media communication has often attracted such public debates as well as generating moral panics about language (Spilioti 2016), akin to the ones referred to by Cameron. The sociolinguistic positioning has ranged from no participation in such debates to explicit projects of redeeming the vernacular, as discussed above. There is then scope for sociolinguists in general and small stories research in particular to take a more explicit stance in research online vis-à-vis the effects of context collapse and scalability on communication. 'Applied' and 'impact-oriented' are terms with currency in academia that could serve as less laden descriptors than 'prescriptive' for this kind of approach.

If we accept this stance as part of virtue ethics in sociolinguistic research online, we also have to accept that it may lead some researchers to carve out a space of sociolinguistic jurisdiction amongst the multiple voices that dominate social media spaces. Burrows and Savage (2014) have discussed this claiming back of a jurisdiction over the study of the social in relation to what they have seen as a 'crisis' in sociological research. This crisis has arisen from sociologists being marginally involved in discussions and debates over the social because their methods have either been appropriated or rendered obsolete by mass and social media. In a virtue ethics framework, reclaiming a distinctive voice and positioning for sociological and sociolinguistic work would be part not just of another methodological or analytical perspective but also of an ethically framed, phronetic perspective. The emerging sociolinguistics of surveillance (Jones 2016), which puts media engineered surveillance processes in the spotlight, is a notable example of a potentially compatible area with the kind of virtue ethics positioning proposed here.

5 Conclusion: Virtue ethics as discipline-specific 'bracketing'

This article examined the ethical implications of the social media property of context collapse for the study of language and discourse in context. I employed

a broad conceptualization of ethical decision making that included moral, political, ideological and aesthetic considerations. I argued that sociolinguists can be faced with ethical discomforts and clashes that arise from the interplay between context collapse processes and outcomes on the one hand and disciplinary priorities on the other. In particular, I claimed that the area's descriptive bias and slow pace of analysis is at odds with processes of online amplification and scalability. Context collapse also makes linking semiotic choices with participants' identities more difficult than in face-to-face contexts. This often results in the sociolinguistic emphasis on communicative resources privileging a view of social media data as texts instead of users. When and how to make the shift from one view to another or gauge the relative importance of each is not always straightforward and can create ethical clashes, exacerbated by difficulties in demarcating stages of research.

I illustrated the above ethical clashes with an example from my own study of small story processes in the social media circulation of an incident of physical assault of two politicians by another. The fact that the assaulter was an MP of the neo-nazi, fascist GD party which has since the incident been found to be a criminal organization has been at the root of a number of ethical clashes for me, as the media-amplified realities created something of a hero out of this man. The difficulty of deciding when to prioritize ethical concerns of data as communicative resources over data as people was exacerbated by the serial nature of how the data evolved, rendering the demarcation of research stages problematic. Furthermore, resolving my ethical clashes by following my own subjective instinct of doing the right thing by me and my politics required going against small stories research principles and adopting methodologically dubious principles of, for example, attributing real intentions to social media users. Overall, it became clear that such ethical clashes operated above and beyond regulatory ethics.

My proposal for allowing space for such clashes in a social media research project, understanding their roots and beginning to address them was to integrate into sociolinguistic research virtue ethics as a sensibility that requires researcher reflexivity. I argued that like *phronesis* in social science research, virtue ethics involves emphasis on practical experience and thus embraces unpredictability and re-considerations of ethical requirements for research. In the absence of a developed framework for virtue ethics in sociolinguistic research on social media, I offered tentative proposals for how this can be achieved, drawing on my experience of how I attempted to address ethical issues in my own study. I showed how changing modes of data presentation and levels of protection of anonymity acknowledged what I perceived as a changing relationship with my data from data as communicative resources to

data as people. I also discussed how I began revisiting and rethinking the initial agenda of small stories research so as to orient it toward a critical agenda of uncovering ideological forces in the creation of social media-amplified, dominant accounts through small stories.

Were I to start the same research project now with virtue ethics considerations from the outset as a means of counter-acting context collapse mechanisms, my sense is that I would attempt to integrate the unpredictability and indeterminacy of ethics into my methodological and analytical choices in a back-and-forth process that Gubrium and Holstein (2009) refer to as ‘bracketing’ in narrative analysis. Bracketing involves keeping a balanced focus through mode-shifting on the what and how of research, to which I would add the who and why, gliding between processes, conditions, and resources. Such a bracketing approach does justice to ethics online as a dynamic and multi-faceted process that is interwoven into methods and analysis. In a bracketing process, virtue ethics can at different times become the main focus, as bracketing assumes that ‘some matters of empirical interest’ may be put aside in order to ‘bring other matters into focus’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 29). This allows us to ‘reap the [rhetorical] benefits of a procedural preference’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 31). Virtue ethics within such a bracketing framework is premised on analytical and methodological mode-shifting throughout the research: from the communicative how to the who and vice versa; from the descriptive (ethnographic) to more ‘prescriptive’, applied epistemological stances. In such a framework, what is allowed, anticipated and embraced is not just the unpredictability and irreducibly subjective experience of ethics but also of what I call *re-ethicising* (i. e. changing the place, nature and requirements for ethics in a project).

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